



ועידת התביעות
Claims Conference
Conference on Jewish Material Claims
Against Germany

Claims Conference Holocaust Survivor Memoir Collection

Access to the print and/or digital copies of memoirs in this collection is made possible by USHMM on behalf of, and with the support of, the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum respects the copyright and other intellectual property rights associated with the materials in its collection and makes good faith efforts to determine the copyright status of each material. The Museum has a good faith belief that the materials in this collection may be made publicly available. The Museum welcomes additional information about copyright status. If you have additional information or concerns about the copyright ownership of materials in this collection, please contact the Museum's Library by phone at 202-479-9717 or by email at reference@ushmm.org.



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2024 with funding from
United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

<https://archive.org/details/bib292174>

Remembrances

Cindy Stone and Rosina Abramson
with Melanie Marcus Greenberg

Our parents used words and told stories in different ways.

Our father, Martin Konichowski, was talkative, especially about the war, but he was often poorly spoken, particularly in English. Our mother, Sonia Gerber Konichowki, conversant in nine languages, wielded her words with wry precision, yet she never discussed the ghetto years. It took both of their voices--his discourse and her writings--to piece the fragments together and make a whole of their lives.

Martin (Maishe) Konichowski, was born on Christmas day of 1913 in the Lithuanian village of "Bobt" (Baptai). His father, tenant farmer Chaim Joshua, had married a widow ten years his senior, Chaya Malka. She came complete with Martin's half-brother, Shmuel, and half-sister, Gittel. While Chaim davened at shul, Chaya managed their modest home. In 1919, a small inheritance provided the family with property in Slobodka, outside Kovno (Kaunas). They went.

The Konichowskis enjoyed the teeming vitality of Jewish life around Kovno, an important Jewish center since the late 1800s despite a long history of expulsions and pogroms. The family established a wholesale meat and dairy operation and enrolled Martin in a cheder.

Early on, Martin became known as a character--vivacious, opinionated, always dressed in high fashion. At 14, soon after his mother's death, he began vocational studies at the Organization for Rehabilitation through Training (ORT). The training lasted three years, after which he found an apprenticeship in a hosiery mill. He followed the boss like a shadow, absorbing everything.

At some point, he served in the Lithuanian army. Later, when his employment at the Diana and Silva mills propelled him to the rank of foreman, he was able to hire a Lithuanian army pal in need of work. Meanwhile, he pursued a woman from a cultured family across town. Dveirel was her name, and despite the differences in their family backgrounds, she and Martin were married.

Sonia Gerber was born in 1915 in Vilna (Vilnius), the intellectual capital of Lithuanian Jewry. Sonia was the first child of a sophisticated couple--Rosa Esther (Melnick) and Leibel Gerber. Though not religious, they made sure their daughter learned Hebrew. Sometime after the births of sons Simon and Meishe, the Gerbers also moved to Kovno. There, Sonia's mother died of heart disease, an illness that would plague the family.

In Kovno, Sonia was always known for her intellect, beauty, and athleticism. By the end of high school, her attributes earned national recognition when she won a competition as one of Lithuania's best students of physical fitness. At 18, she traveled to Denmark to claim her prize--a scholarship in "plastique" exercise techniques. She returned to Kovno the following year, charmed by the Danish people and fluent in their language. But all was not well in Kovno by the time of her return.

In the late 1930s, anti-Jewish activity was on the rise in Lithuania and across Europe. By June of 1941, Kovno fascists got a head start on the advancing German army by staging their own pogrom. Within days, however, the Germans established command. The Nazis herded 29,760 Kovno Jews into a crowded ghetto in Slobodka.

Beginning with intellectuals and moving on to women, children, and the elderly, a number of "actions" were executed to eliminate those deemed incapable of slave labor. Many Jews were murdered in old military forts around the city such as the IX Fort. Others were sent in "transports" to German concentration camps.

From the first days of their imprisonment, Kovno Jews formed a united resistance movement and a collective commitment to documenting ghetto life. Diarists and artists, poets and engineers compiled a cache of documents and photographs, which they stored underground. This ghetto-wide complicity in partisan activity and documentation of life under Nazi rule makes the Kovno ghetto unique in the annals of World War II.

In the grim prison village, Sonia took a "ghetto husband" only to lose him to a "transport." She changed her birth date to 1918--to appear younger and of greater potential use to the Nazis. Her father ran the ghetto bathhouse. They subsisted on rations.

Martin fared better than many in the ghetto, because his skills as a factory foreman were valued by the Nazis. They assigned him to manage production of military garments at the Silva textile plant. Lithuanian laborers drafted to serve the Reich left vacancies to be filled by slave labor from the ghetto. The Germans decided who got chosen for the brigade, but Martin could influence how many workers were assigned. Creative counting and a daring spirit enabled him to inflate the numbers--reaching 350 Jewish workers, mostly women, at the peak. Soon, Sonia Gerber was among those who filed out of the ghetto into the factory and our Martin's care.

Work brigades offered a ticket to hope for Sonia and others lucky enough to have escaped extermination. Sonia used her contact with Lithuanian factory workers to trade household goods for food and other essentials. Martin's scheme was more daring. He bought guns and ammunition from that same army buddy at Silva, who owed him a favor. The bundles, which Martin smuggled back into the ghetto at night, were distributed to freedom fighters in the woods. This steady stream of weapons helped sustain the partisan movement.

A fighter by nature, Martin felt compelled to use his hands directly in combat against the enemy. He and his wife Dveirel were among those led to and through the forest to join a band of partisans. They fought the Germans with bullets and cunning, while battling the insidious enemies of starvation and disease. Most of Martin's comrades fell under Nazi fire. So, too, fell Dveirel.

In July of 1944, with Russian tanks approaching, the Nazis lit the ghetto on fire and fled. Of the nearly 30,000 Jews first encircled by barbed wire, only a handful crawled out from the smoldering rubble when Soviet troops liberated Kovno on August 1. Among the survivors were Sonia, her father, and an orphaned boy. They, along with a few others, emerged from a "maline" (hiding place) in the bathhouse, where they had wedged themselves between the fireproof walls and the roof.

Sonia began to search for her brothers. Simon was alive! He had been relocated to a Displaced Persons Camp in Landsberg, Germany. The news of Meishe was painful beyond words. A partisan who undeniably suffered torture and interrogation by the Nazis, Meishe was one of 64 inmates who successfully escaped the IX Fort. He was found guilty of betrayal and assassinated by former compatriots in the woods. Meishe's innocence, fully affirmed by our father, has been confirmed by subsequent historical accounts.

by former compatriots in the woods. Meishe's innocence, fully affirmed by our father, has been confirmed by subsequent historical accounts.

Martin's original band of 110 fighters had dwindled to 11 by war's end. They stepped out from the shadows and returned to the ashes where Kovno once stood. Martin recognized Sonia from the work brigade. Clusters of stunned survivors began walking across Europe. Evidence of genocide awaited them at every turn. In Lublin, Martin and Sonia began walking as a couple.

There were side trips of hope. At one point, Martin heard that his father, Chaim, had survived Dachau and was back in Kovno. Martin circled back, but the rumor was false. He rejoined Sonia and her father, Leibel, and carried the Kovno boy on his shoulders through Budapest to Vienna and across the Alps. Italy was the group's short-term destination. There, they could seek passage to Palestine by ship.

On August 25, 1945, the travelers arrived in Milan, which was a whirl with opportunity. The streets were lined with jubilant soldiers from the Palestine brigade. The air was electric. Everyone was crazy to get on with living.

Suddenly, there were alternatives to life in Palestine. Martin's knowledge of textile manufacturing--specifically the location of machine parts in Eastern Europe--was worth its weight in lire. Italian factory owners paid him to import what they needed to jump-start the knitting industry. Married without fanfare by an Italian rabbi in October of 1946, Martin and Sonia spun--from thin air--a new life. Trading their rags for stylish outfits, they soon drove a cherry red Lancia, joined their friends in nightclubs, and reclaimed an urban lifestyle--with a new Italian twist. On July 9, 1947, their celebration of life embraced a new dimension: a baby whom they named "Rosa Malka" but called "Rosina," in tribute to their love of Italy.

Several years passed in this hard-won life of health and prosperity, but friends and relatives who had immigrated to America tugged at our parents' hearts. United States government policy also applied pressure: "Make quota" (immigrate to America)--now or never. For Martin, Sonia, and Rosina, the answer was "now."

Impeccably dressed, luggage brimming, the Konichowskis traveled on the Queen Elizabeth in May of 1950. Rosina was nearly three and remembers the journey. Our parents hobnobbed with Gregory Peck, also on board. We disembarked in New York on Memorial Day; Dad told Rosina the parade marched to welcome her. A more intimate greeting came from "Americaner" cousins, Howard, Celia and Sara Chesler, who traveled from Cleveland to meet our ship, along with several old friends, newly resettled in the new world.

The marching band, it turned out, wasn't really for us. We wound up in a rooming house on 51st Street in Borough Park. Late in the year, our grandfather, Leibel, was able to join us. All the while, Martin pounded pavements in New York, Cleveland, and Boston, trying to establish himself in the textile industry. Like so many other refugees, he spoke no English. Like so many others, he found no work.

In 1951, the Konichowskis joined the throng of refugee families that had been resettled by Jewish relief organizations on farms near Vineland, New Jersey. Here, on a seven-acre chicken

Though a tragic history and rich heritage bound us to our neighbors without need of words, many, including our father, did speak of the war years. On this subject our mother remained silent, though her voice rang out as a leader in the community. She taught classes in Hebrew and physical fitness. An active member of Pioneer Women, she helped establish a children's summer camp for the burgeoning "second generation."

In Alliance, life was punctuated by celebrations once again. In addition to observing Jewish holidays with neighbors, our parents attended New Year's Eve galas and competitive card games, at which our mother sometimes appeared smoking a thin cigar. Our father shared country pleasures with Rosina, including midnight swims at the nearby Maurice River.

Farming was a far cry from slave labor in the ghetto, but it also fell short of pre- and post-war livelihoods. Despite the rich sense of community, financial circumstances were harsh. Martin took a night job as a mechanic in a textile mill in Philadelphia. By day, he slept and restored chicken coops. Sonia tended the chickens and kept domestic life intact.

Our parents were determined to improve the family's lifestyle. On January 23, 1957, as we awaited the next chapter of family history, a van pulled up to move our belongings into storage just as Sonia went into labor. This time our parents' production was "made in the U.S.A." The official moniker was "Cynthia Leah," but they called the baby "Cindy," which they viewed as a thoroughly American name.

The transition to another beginning lasted nine months, with a Vineland rooming house serving as Cindy's first home. Martin devoted every minute to securing our new future. Using the \$30,000 from the sale of the farm, he rented an abandoned factory under the Brooklyn Bridge. We moved back to Borough Park (this time to an apartment!) in April of 1958.

C&K Knitting Mill was just the first of several factories our father eventually established--without ever borrowing money. Choosing and training partners to manage the financial side of the business, Martin kept his hands on the machinery and the industry's pulse. He used his technical skill, design flair, and undeniable charisma to produce and market textiles a step ahead of the latest trends. The LeMark mill in the '60s manufactured bulky sweaters. Dad rode the polyester wave at the BelCo plant in the '70s.

While Martin worked 12-hour days, six days a week, Sonia managed the home front. Though not devout, our mother kept a traditional Shabbos, complete with chicken soup and "flanken." On special occasions, she made "teyglach" cookies in the Old World manner, simmered and steeped in honey, gingered to an amber sheen.

Sonia savored other cultures as well, an appetite she shared with teenage Rosina. Together they visited ethnic restaurants and art galleries. They discussed literature. As a mother, Sonia inspired her elder daughter to seize the opportunities she herself had enjoyed, and supported Rosina's choice to attend college away from home.

In 1965, seeking a more modern apartment, our family moved to the new neighborhood of Canarsie. Martin and Sonia went to register Cindy for her first day of third grade. In a few days,

they planned to join Rosina for parents' weekend at Boston University. It never happened. On the stairs of Cindy's school, Sonia suffered a heart-attack.

After her release from the hospital, our mother was dispirited and took to her bed. By her side stood a tower of books and a bell with a Buddha-shaped handle. Cindy was delivering trays of food at age eight. The following years brought Sonia more illness and despair. From a weakened state, she orchestrated Cindy's training on the piano. Now her younger daughter, at 12, shopped for and cooked the Shabbos meal. Fortunately, Sonia had reestablished friendships with survivors from Kovno; these women she recruited to take Cindy to ballet class and concerts. Cindy became the darling of this large "extended family." Her cultural education also included many rounds of Bar Mitzvah parties and holiday feasts.

On Sunday mornings, our father made a ritual of cooking Cindy jelly omelets and preparing her coffee just so. Then the two of them snaked their way through Brooklyn traffic to the factory beneath the bridge. Dad, "The President," watched Cindy explore his vast domain, where knitting looms towered at dizzying heights.

During the '70s, Mom and Dad began traveling to Israel, where they reconnected with family and friends unseen since the war. Mom would return reinvigorated, inspired by all she saw. She convinced Cindy to sample kibbutz life after an early graduation from high school at age 16.

Between excursions, however, Sonia's spirits would dip. Rosina encouraged Mom to sustain her vitality by continuing her education, and Mom complied. Summoning her courage, she enrolled in Brooklyn College. Decades older than her classmates, she proved a popular and gifted student. She delighted in the intellectual milieu, exploring philosophy, French, and painting. There were years when Sonia and Cindy (an undergraduate) strolled the campus paths together, beginning to forge a relationship as adults. Dad was proud of his wife's return to college. Suddenly he found time to leave work early and drive his scholarly spouse home from school.

In 1971, Sonia made the decision to study writing. Tentatively at first, but with increasing confidence, she chronicled the miracles of motherhood, health, and hope. And, for the first time, she unearthed the stories that lay buried within her heart. What she couldn't say with her voice she revealed with pen in hand. Page after page rolled forth like cloth off a bolt, each essay exposing some poignant sample of her past. We still clutch those papers with the eager hands of children, always grasping for a firmer hold on the complex woman who gave us life.

On March 26, 1977, at age 62, a final heart attack put our mother's pen to rest. Her death was among the first in our extended family of survivors. To this day, friends recall her intelligence, elegance, and wisdom. They still speak of her youthful beauty, the graceful movement of her hands.

After Mom's death, our father, at 64, walked away from his factory and never worked again. He dressed daily as if headed for an important meeting with buyers. He inquired, with mild interest, about business opportunities. But with the loss of Sonia, Dad's drive as a provider was lost as well. Although he survived her by nearly 20 years, he had loosened his own grip on life. On February 24, 1995, our father died.

Why, then, are we compelled to pay tribute to our parents? Not only because of what they went through during the war. Of course they were heroes. All the Nazi's victims were. No, we honor our parents as well for the lives they lived before and created after.

Our mother was motivated by empathy, nature, art, and a love of learning. Her potential was a living force, unfulfilled yet unextinguishable. She gripped it in her hands, like an athlete poised to hurl the javelin. As her daughters, we felt the weight of that promise. We wanted more for her, are still a little lost without her, but are grateful for her teachings. We still picture those hands, sorry they never smoothed the hair of her grandsons--Alex Joshua, Benjamin Zachary, Samuel Jordan.

Martin, our colorful, creative, irrepressible father, was ruled by a passion for justice. Decades after the war, whenever he gathered with his cronies, he still railed against suspected collaborators and celebrated Stalin's airdrops to the partisans. He was willful, impossibly honest, and his smile brightened the room. It could even light up a forest. In his seventies, Dad walked with us in the woods. "This reminds me of the days when I was a partisan," he mused. In a flash, Martin hauled himself up a tree. He fell down. He got up and laughed.

Separately and together, Martin and Sonia Konichowski fell down and got up, over and over, drawing on reserves of character and faith. As sisters, we stand in awe of the lives our parents wove for us. To bear children with love, without bitterness, after what they had lived through was a miracle in itself. Rejecting fear, they inspired us to travel the more adventurous path, to stretch our abilities while reinforcing traditions at home and recreating Jewish communal life. Our understanding of these accomplishments only deepens over time.

We are the daughters of Martin and Sonia Konichowski. We and our generation are the legacy of the Kovno Jews. In these pages, we honor our parents' lives and the Kovno covenant to tell what happened.

Now, we pass the story from our hands into yours.

December, 2000

Copyright Cindy Stone and Rosina Abramson. © September, 2000. All rights expressly reserved; no reproduction is permitted without the express written consent of Cindy Stone and Rosina Abramson.